

*Mercedes Tompkins
* Combahee River Collective
* 6 May 1998
* by phone, Boston, MA

K: The first question I want to ask was how long you participated in Combahee?

M: Probably about a year.

K: And do you remember what year that was?

M: Seventy- seven?

K: Would it be the same year as Margo Okazawa-Rey?

M: Yeah. About the same time.

K: And how did you become involved with it?

M: Well, through a friend who was involved. I don't know if she gave you the name of Demita Frazier?

K: Yes.

M: She did. Well, Demita was good friends with Barbara Smith and that's how I sort of got plugged into that whole network of folk. And people started to meet at our house because Margo and I lived in a collective household. We collectively owned a sixteen room Victorian house so it was open space, basically. People could come and meet there. We met there several times.

K: Okay. Just curious: how many other people were in the household?

M: Well, it fluctuated, but that base number was about six. We had several other people who stopped in and stayed for a six month period. There was an Asian woman from Hawaii who stayed with us for about a year. Charlene McCray [?] stayed with us for a while. So, you know, people just came in and out basically.

K: So you met there. Now was this in Boston?

M: Yeah, it was. It was in Dorchester.

K: So were you a part of---it seems like there was the Collective, the Boston-based Collective and then some people who only came to the retreats. Did you do both of those?

M: I went to one retreat. Oh my god, I can't believe you mentioned the retreat. My memory is, like [laughter]. I went to one on the Cape and don't ask me who was at this thing. But I did go to one on the Cape.

K: Okay. But you were more involved then with the Collective in Boston?

M: Right.

K: Okay. Before we get to that I wanted to ask if you belonged to any other organizations or were active in any other causes before Combahee?

M: No, not really 'cause I had just come to Boston maybe a year or two before that and was in the process of really identifying as a lesbian at the time. I didn't really associate myself really too much with any particular group. I was too busy trying to figure out who I was at the time actually.

K: Where were you coming to Boston from?

M: New York City.

K: So---

M: And I was young. I mean, I was twenty, twenty-one. I was pretty young.

K: Do you recall---I know that it was a Collective, but do you recall exactly how decisions were made within the Collective?

M: Well, collectively how things got decided---I mean, we discussed stuff pretty much as a group, but there was sort of an underground network. Before things [chuckle] came to the group things got filtered. So most of the requests for information or participation or anything that was sort of on the docket for Combahee went through Barbara Smith. I wasn't particularly close to Barbara so I wasn't in her inner circle.

K: About how many people would you say were in that inner circle?

M: I would probably say maybe three?

K: Okay. So would that probably be Barbara, Demita Frazier, and Beverly Smith?

M: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah. [sounds hesitant, but sort of like she doesn't want to say?]

K: And then how many people would you say were in the rest of the group?

M: The core group I'd say there was probably another five, six of us.

K: Do you recall, off-hand, the names of those people?

M: Um. You know, Barbara, Beverly, Demita, Margo---there was a woman named Helen. I'm trying to think of Helen's last name. Margo's memory for this would probably be a lot better than mine. Helen, Charlene. My memory's gone. I think it's being a parent. It really is pretty bad. The long-term memory is a lot better than the short-term memory. Those are the only names that I can think of at this point.

K: That would be about six.

M: Maybe I can find a picture and I can just sort of point out people that were in it [laughter]. 'Cause I do have an old picture.

K: Okay. So how would you then described the relationship between the underground network and then the core group? Was that something that was discussed, like, how decisions were made or was it just a given?

M: No, it wasn't really discussed at all. I mean, I felt pretty much outside of the group only because I really pushed the envelope around the whole issue of class and educational elitism. And I was, you know, a college drop out and I was, at the time, really interested in becoming a blue collar worker and I was also very, very much interested in connecting with working class Black women and women of color around the city. And I think that that's one of the reasons why---I don't know if Margo mentioned this to you---but she and I pulled together an activity that was called "Third World Night at the Saints".

K: No, she didn't mention that.

M: Third World Night at the Saints was a night---The Saints was a local bar and we asked---we approached the management of the bar and asked them for a night for women of color. And I---we were both looked down upon because the bar was not the place to meet Black intellectuals, so why would we want to do this whole thing at the bar. You know, you'd attract a certain---a "different kind" of woman of color. And they-

Mercedes Tompkins, Combahee River Collective, 6 May 1998, by phone, Boston, MA

--you know, most of the folk with the exception of, I'd say, Demita, myself and Margo really didn't---I mean, Charlane actually did go to the club, but there was a whole section of folks that did not go to the club at all.

K: So was this a night for lesbian and straight women?

M: Yes. It was for lesbian and straight women because the Saints itself was a club that attracted feminists. So it was a major meeting place for people to come after abortion rights group meetings or anti-racism group meetings. People would just come. Especially on Wednesday nights people would come and just hang out, have a beer after having a very intense meeting and dance a little bit, whether or not you were gay or straight. You'd just go there. So, it was a meeting place.

So we started this group with the support---I mean, at the time I was with a white time and I think Demita--Margo was as well. It was on Monday nights. We'd come down, we'd try to have a place where women could dance and socialize or do poetry readings or art shows or whatever. We tried to mix it up a little bit. But a place where we could go and not feel like we were the only one in the club, but that there was a reason for us to connect.

K: So you mentioned that you both had white lovers at the time. Were they allowed to attend or was it strictly for women of color?

M: No. No, this was exclusive. It was exclusively women of color. And it was really hard for the white women to deal with that. They were, like, challenging us at the door. But, you know, I put my lover on the door. I said, "You deal with your sisters." [laughter].

K: Do the educating there.

M: You do the educating thing and tell them that this is the right thing to do [laughter].

K: So, why don't we talk about what---'cause you sort of brought it up---what sorts of ideological disputes there were within the organization?

M: Like I said, I was pretty much out of it because I was really pushing it, pushing things around the whole issue of class and educational privilege and snob---I mean, I thought it was snobbish, to tell you the truth. Not to say that I don't respect and I'm not myself an intellectual, but I really have issues with, you know, snobbery and elitism. And a lot of that comes from myself having grown up in the projects and just feeling like there shouldn't be that---we should not be reinforcing those---that kind of stuff because we should be beyond that. Class and educational elitism.

elitism

K: So, how did it manifest itself?

M: Well, I think the types of women that the group would outreach to, the kinds of activities that we would kind of support were very intellectual. Did not reach regular women of color, I didn't believe. That we were---I mean, and not to say---don't get me wrong. I think that there's space for people who are thinkers and then there's space for do-ers and there's---I think I try to strive for the two coming together at least in my life. So I think that the kinds of activities that we supported really did not---it didn't allow for working class or poor women to be involved. Now not to say that Barbara or Beverly or any of the other women didn't have---did not speak out on working class issues. You know what I mean? They did speak out on those issues, but from afar. You know what I mean? I don't know if they even interacted with any working class women, to tell you the truth.

K: So what kind of activities are examples that would sort of perpetuate that kind of elitism?

M: Well, I can tell you a little bit later---not necessarily in the history of Combahee, but the off-shoot of that was Kitchen Table Press. I was roommates with Evelyn Hammonds. I don't know if you're going to interview her at all.

K: I'm hoping to.

M: But Evelyn was at the time my roommate and she was very interested in getting Kitchen Table Press to do something other than novels or, you know, books. She really wanted them to invest their energies into doing something would reach more women. Something like a periodical that could be left out in laundromats, in places where people congregate---that would focus on women of color and issues that were relevant to women of color. And that was not something that they supported. I mean, Barbara did not like that kind---that's the kind of thing that she would---it's not "highbrow" enough. You know, books will stay longer than periodicals.

K: Well, how did she---this is sort of speculating, but do you think that she thought that books were just as accessible as those sorts of periodicals and, therefore, not recognizing issues of accessibility of---

M: I don't think that she thought it was important. I just don't think that she thought it was important, to tell you the truth. That wasn't her audience. Her audience was educated women of---lesbians of color. I think it sort of feeds into---I mean, I think that she and a lot of the women that were attracted to this group were women who had master's and beyond. PhD's and master's. So they really bought into the system of, of course, being published. You know what I mean? Getting tenure and being a part of that whole established system. The educational, academic system. So, that was kind of the audience: women who were willing to read their stuff.

*theorizing
overaction?*

K: So, would you say it was more theorizing?

M: Right. Like, one of the things we did, the main activities that we did was we read books and we critiqued. And spent a lot of time thinking and talking about different issues that came out of the books that we would read and, you know, hey. I wanted to move outside of just talking about it. I wanted to do it.

K: So, would you say that that's a lot of what happened at the retreats? That that was sort of, like, the Collective would decide what the agenda would be for the retreat and then take it to the women there?

M: Right.

K: And it's more discussion.

M: And I would say the retreats were more a place---that was much more of a place to meet like-minded women, women who were thinkers. Women who were thinkers and activists. It was a place to do more, some of the bonding. And to also talk about some of the issues that we were working on, but a lot of it was the bonding piece of it. A place to sort of get away from the day-to-day doings of the work or writing or being an activist. To sort of a hang around colleagues, comrade and just relax.

K: So more re-charging?

M: Right. Exactly.

K: So, you mentioned the Third World Night at the Saints, but are there other events that stand out for you from your time with Combahee?

M: Not really. I think one of the things that we---one of the main activities that we did in the late '70s and probably I left around this time was, um, the Boston community was---we were mobilizing ourselves against---there were murders that were happening in the City. There were about thirteen women who were killed, Black women who were killed in Roxbury and in the South End. So there were a number of, a lot of meetings trying to get a march together, trying to pull together a political agenda that we could put in front of the powers that be to do something about women who were being killed. A lot of our focus went into that situation. There was a major march to the State House. And it was also around the time when the Take

Back the Night marches were beginning to happen. A number of us got involved in the violence against women movement and that was sort of the beginnings of that.

Now the other activity that we did do as a group, but then the group sort of---it was interesting because it was an activity of the group, but then it took off because the task itself was bigger than the group. The group began to redefine itself. This was pulling together a concert. "Varied Voices of Black Women" [flyer in LHA/Brooklyn]. And in Boston Varied Voices of Black Women was---Olivia Productions approached Combahee to pull it off. We then convened a group of---called a meeting of a group of women who were interested in helping us to pull it off because we didn't know anything about music production. So there were a number---there were white women. It was a multi-cultural group of women who really pulled this event off and it was done in a way that was more like an organizing activity than a concert production. So we mobilized communities, we got endorsements, whatever. And we pulled off this event. The event didn't make money, but it did pull folks together who were interested in hearing and seeing women of color who were performers. So, that was a major event that we did. That was sort of a cultural event.

Olivia

K: Was that one of the only times or one of several times that Combahee worked with other organizations like that?

M: I would say that individually---see what was really unique about the Collective itself was that it attracted women who in their own right, had their own interests. So, for example, Margo and I were interested in working with working class women and being in---connecting with working class women and doing that. And so we could go off within the group and do that on our own. Barbara and Beverly were interested in the reproductive rights---Barbara was---in the reproductive rights discussion. And she went off and did that. So we all had our own interests and then we came to the group with---and that's what made the group really rich because we were all activists in our right. We were coming to this group to---I mean, in some ways to bond and to connect and to get recharged because for the most part in Boston, the whole political scene in the '70s, and probably still today---and that's a whole 'nother issue about where women are organizing and how they're organizing today. I don't really know where and how. I don't see it. There aren't places where we are gathering to have dialogue anymore. I don't believe. Maybe I'm just disconnected.

K: No. It's not there.

M: But, you know, most of what was happening was with white women and so there was no place where we felt comfortable and we could talk about what was happening in the context of the groups and the organizations that we were working in outside of Combahee. And then come together and create our agenda, our own definition for what it means to be a feminist. So we were working within these white feminist organizations, but who was gonna, you know, and we were feeling frustrated about that because it didn't really meet our own reality. It didn't really address the reality that we were dealing with. So when we came together, we talked about what was going on within those other groups and really tried to formulate our own agenda. And in that way the readings that we did helped us. You know what I mean? You know, this is what's going on, this is what the dialogue is about now, or at least what's being written. What do we feel about that? It gave us a space to really sort of have some discourse about it.

K: That--- I just had a click. That makes sense to me now. This is going back a little, but how often would you say you met?

M: Oh, boy. I'd say probably---maybe every other week. I mean, that's probably formally and then---I mean, Demita lived around the corner from me. Margo lived in the same house. You know what I mean? At one point Margo was lovers with Barbara Smith and so I saw Barbara a lot.

K: So you still talked outside---

M: Yeah. We still talked.

K: How do you think Combahee was viewed by other organizations in the area?

M: With a lot of respect. More respect. I mean, it's funny that you should call and ask about this because given the reputation that we had as a group---not just in Boston, but outside of Boston---the group wasn't that big. And I think a lot of it was because Barbara used the group, you know, Combahee to sort of further her own agenda and made the group seem larger than it actually was. You get my drift?

K: Yeah.

M: I mean, I would say there probably wasn't more than ten people involved in Combahee while I was there. Now, I might have been at a lull, but I didn't see more than about ten folks involved in it. And, you know, Combahee was given credit for a lot of different things in the things that she's written, in different articles that she's written. I've even seen it in books. But the group wasn't really that big. Within Boston people looked to Combahee for anchoring around things---around the whole issue of race and culture. So that if you touch base with us or we were involved in giving support to a certain position, it almost gave them a rubber stamp.

K: Okay. So they had permission to---

M: Yeah. "Combahee was involved in this."

K: Are you familiar with an article written by a woman by the name of Jaime Grant called, "Who's Killing Us?"

M: No.

K: Well, I'll ask the question. In this article she talks about the mobilization around the murders in a group called "CRISIS". Were you familiar with that?

M: No.

K: I can sort of put it into---I'm sorry I'm getting tired.

M: I'm sorry.

K: No, no. I can put it into the framework of what you said about the core theorizing about the working class, but perhaps not being as involved because she give Combahee a lot of credit for working with the community.

M: Oh, she does?

K: Yeah. Sort of being this bridge between feminists and the Black community.

M: Well, it depends on what she is considering the Black community? If she's thinking of the Black lesbian community as being the Black community then that's limited. I must say that in a lot of ways Barbara was very much connected to certain political folks in the South End. She was. That there were people who were activists in the South End of Boston who looked to Barbara for a certain perspective. But if you're asking whether she was connected to the mainstream African American community, I would say not. These were people who were activists already, but---and I also have to say that the murders really gelled a lot of folks in Boston. I mean, it really brought together the South End community. In fact, the shelter that I was the director of for ten years came out of the murders.

K: Okay. What was that?

M: Casa Myrna Vasquez. And that was a shelter that serviced mostly Hispanic women, women of Caribbean, and Asian women and it was in the South End. But it brought together folk who really wanted

to deal with the issue of violence within the home, especially within the Latino community. And that came out of the murders really.

K: And you were the director of that for ten years?

M: Yeah.

K: So pretty much from the time it started?

M: No, I was the director in the '80s, but the shelter itself only had two directors before me [laughter]. So it was ten years into its inception.

K: Do you---were you aware of any other Black women's organizations that were active around the same time period?

M: No. No, no. We were it. No. None at all.

K: Do you recall any sorts of adversaries of the group either government, etc?

M: No, not at all. I mean, because we were a real niche. We were a niche group. We worked within the feminist community. And not within the Black community-at-large. Let's face it. During that time at least, and probably still today, for the most part the Black community-at-large, the leaders within it are very homophobic and Barbara's an out lesbian. So that really sort of alienated her from the onset.

K: So perhaps it was more of an avoidance on the part of the Black organizations then?

M: Um-hm. Avoidance and just not giving credibility to the position. You've gotta realize that we were coming out of the civil rights movement and here we have these feminists screaming that they want rights. And we were basically saying, "Yes, we want rights along with these women, but we have a different kind of analysis of it." That didn't really get heard that much. What got heard was, "Yeah, we think this is cool also." And so, you know, basically, we got marginalized.

K: Did you leave the organization?

M: It started to fall apart. I think that there were some issues between Barbara and Beverly. And there was--you know, because once the women in the group---I mean, Barbara and Margo broke up and I was very close to Margo. And so, basically, basically it just started to fall apart. When Margo and I left the group there was then only Demita and Barbara and Beverly essentially. I think Helen stopped teaching at Wellsley and moved on. So it just changed. Things changed and there weren't the same folks who were the core part of the group were not there anymore.

K: Right. Well, this may be semantics, but you say you left the group. Margo says you were both "kicked out," so would you make those the same thing?

M: I would say Margo probably got kicked out and I got kicked out because I knew Margo [big laughter].

K: Guilt by association.

M: Yeah. And it was around "pussy politics" [laughter]. I think also it didn't help that, at least from my perspective, I was pushing a whole 'nother agenda, which was working with community women. That was just my agenda and I wasn't into cowtowing, kissing butt. You know, "Oh, Barbara, you're great. You're so wonderful." I wasn't into that and she knew that and it really pissed her off.

K: So there were some interpersonal things definitely.

M: Oh, yeah. Not that we weren't cordial with each other. If I didn't see her---if I saw her on the street I wouldn't say hello or we wouldn't engage. It's just that I didn't---I mean, within the white community, within the white feminist community, what tends to happen is---this happens around all different kinds of issues. Not just feminists. It's political. Doesn't matter. People look for their savior and they keep using that person over and over and deifying them. "Oh, we'll call Barbara. Oh, we'll call Robin [Morgan?]." They wind up being on ten different boards and they're over-used. I wasn't into feedin' that. I just wasn't into feeding it. She's a smart woman. Barbara is a smart woman and so is Beverly, but I'm not into feeding---there are other women out there that can do the same thing. They may not---you just have to look.

K: So based on that, how would you---would you say it was really a collective then? The organization?

M: I would say that it wasn't really a collective. Like I said, we met as a group, but that there were power issues.

K: So do you think that's part of the reason why it doesn't exist anymore?

M: Oh, I think so. Because it basically fell on the shoulders of Barbara Smith. She wanted everything to come through her. And then the other thing that happened---and I'm not so clear about this, but I'm almost certain that this was the case---is that Demita had a falling out with Barbara. So then that also---you know, what I mean? It shrunk the group. And she never slept with Barbara, but it was a group that was based on personality and ego. When I say that Barbara used the group to further her own agenda, I mean, Barbara couldn't go out and say in the beginning, "I believe in this." But she could say, "There's a group of Black women who are doing this." You know what I mean? "I'm writing this article and I'm a part of Combahee."

K: "And here's the Combahee River Collective Statement."

M: Yes. Exactly. Although we did talk about the statement. Don't get me wrong. We did work on that statement, but it was a lot her work.

K: So did she bring a draft to the group?

M: Yeah.

K: To the five or six people that you mentioned?

M: Yeah.

K: So, overall, what do you think Combahee accomplished?

M: Well, I think in a lot of ways it did---you know, I've criticized saying, on one hand, that the group appeared to be bigger than it was. On the flip side of that is that people knew that we were there and we were out there networking. Individuals within the group were networking throughout the women's community and that we had a greater presence. It gave some legitimacy, the group gave legitimacy to Black feminist issues, and thought and theory. I think it was, and it still is, fairly important that the group did exist.

K: So what do you think it did for you personally?

M: Well, I think that it did connect---it grounded me at a time when I wasn't, like I said, I was coming out at the time. I had just come to Boston and I'm an artist. So I was an airhead artist floating, you know. So it gave me some footing. It gave me a place to be myself and to really articulate who I am in respect to that particular community. Who I am as a feminist and what my values are and interject that into the dialogue about Black women and feminism and where we all fit into that. That whole dialogue and that whole debate. So I think it gave me some footing here in Boston. It introduced me to a whole group of women

who I may not have ever been connected to and it really helped define who I was as a Black Feminist. It really did help me on a personal level.

K: Great. Two more easy questions. Do you know the current whereabouts of other former members? Like Demita Frazier?

M: She's here in Boston. And I think she's probably listed. She's in Jamaica Plain. I don't talk to her. Right now. But she is in Jamaica Plain. I do know that because I have seen her on the street.

K: I ran into Evelyn Hammonds.

M: Evelyn's in Cambridge and she's at MIT. She's a tenured professor there.

K: Right. Do you two still talk?

M: Oh yeah.

K: Last question was do you have any documentation? You said you had a photo. Do you have a photo of the group?

M: Yeah, I have a photo of the group. Oh god, when we were young. Where were we? It was after a meeting or something like that. Somebody took a photo of us.

K: Okay. For future reference.

M: Yeah. I'll try to dig it out.

K: What do you do now? You said you're an artist.

M: Well, I don't do art. I work for OXFAM. OXFAM America. I work in their national outreach department. I manage the unit there and we do outreach on college campuses and high schools and stuff. In fact, we do have a group at Emory.

[miscellaneous chit chat]

M: I think a key piece of that [why bfos don't exist anymore] is that we're all really over-extended. You know, to think that we would, I mean, Combahee could have taken up all of our time. And to think that we were involved in other groups, many other groups outside of Combahee. And like I said, people tend to keep calling on the same folks. If there's a crisis, what does Combahee feel? And what position do we have on this? We're just over-extended and it was really hard to really create new leadership. How do you keep regenerating, you know, keep generating new leadership? And you get kind of burned out---besides the personal stuff that goes on between---I mean, when there's so few of you working on an issue, it becomes kind of incestuous in a way [laughter].

K: How close it too close is, I guess, the question.

M: Right. All of your family stuff gets worked out in the group.

K: Yeah. Well, do you have any last thoughts?

M: No.

[End]